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AUTHOR Kahles, William
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ABSTRACT

This paper reports the results of a circulation study in the government documents departments of a public library and an academic library. Based on a systematic random sample of the records of materials returned in 1981, the study had two purposes: to seek evidence to support the assumption that current documents circulate more than older ones; and to justify, and begin to lay the groundwork for a more far-reaching analysis of documents use. It was found that U.S. Government publications were the predominant type of publication circulated in 1981, hardcopy publications comprised 99% of the materials circulated in both institutions, circulation of documents published in 1981 was relatively low in comparison to 1979 and 1980 publications, and documents published within the last decade (1972-1981) accounted for more than 75% of 1981 circulation in both institutions. It is suggested that these findings may be useful in deciding what materials should be weeded in the institutions studied. (Author/THC)

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CIRCULATION OF GOVERNMENT DOCUMENTS IN TWO LARGE URBAN DEPOSITORY LIBRARIES

William Kahles

Documents Department

University Library

University of Illinois at Chicago

Box 8198

Chicago, Illinois 60680

IR051062

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CIRCULATION OF GOVERNMENT DOCUMENTS

IN TWO LARGE URBAN DEPOSITORY LIBRARIES

ABSTRACT

This paper reports the results of a study of circulation in the government documents departments of a public library and an academic library. It is based on a systematic random sample of the records of material returned in 1981 and finds that recent publications circulated more in both collections. The results may be useful for deciding what material should be weeded in the institutions studied.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

The idea for this paper can be traced to a perennial library problem--collection growth. The concerns which prompted this investigation arose from experiences in a documents department. To be more specific, how does the documents librarian decide which government publications are to be weeded when space is limited.[1] When required to make such decisions, many documents librarians would probably agree that older material is less used and is therefore a likely candidate for weeding. One possible measure of use is circulation.

Many circulation studies are found in the library literature.[2] Both monographs and serials have been studied in a variety of subject areas. For the most part, these studies have been done in academic institutions. If one were to make a single

general statement on the results of these studies, it might be that they have found that current material circulates more frequently. To date no such circulation study has been attempted in government documents.[3]

This paper reports the results of a study of the circulation records of the documents departments of an academic library and a public library. The purpose of the study was twofold: first, to seek evidence to support the assumption that current documents circulate more than older ones; second, to justify, and begin to lay the groundwork for, a more far-reaching analysis of documents use.

THE LIBRARIES

The libraries are centrally located in a large midwestern metropolitan area. Each has a segregated documents collection with United States Government Publications classified according to the Superintendent of Documents scheme. The public library documents department is located in the the central library near the city's business district. Nearly all documents are kept in closed stacks but are accessible to patrons for browsing upon request. The department strives to be as complete as possible and selects approximately 98% of the items made available to federal

depository libraries. It is also a depository for state documents and attempts to collect local documents as well. The library has been a federal depository since the 19th century and the total collection now consists of approximately 1,100,000 pieces. The department does not encourage circulation of its material, but it is left to the discretion of the individual librarian whether a document circulates or not. In addition, documents circulate to branch libraries of the institution, to other libraries on interlibrary loan, and to business institutions through special arrangements.

The academic library is more selective but still receives 85% of available items. It is a depository for state documents and collects local publications. The majority of the collection is housed in open stacks. The library has been a federal depository since the middle of the 20th century and the total collection now stands at approximately 900,000 pieces. There has been much effort to build the retrospective collection through gift and purchase. Circulation is limited to students, faculty, and staff of the school, and to members of institutions participating in mutual lending arrangements. Documents also circulate to other institutions through interlibrary loan.

METHODOLOGY

Systematic random samples were taken at each library from the circulation records of items returned in 1981 (Table 1). For each item in the sample the date of publication was derived from the call number or in some instances from the title. This was done by examining the shelflist, using bibliographic tools (e.g., Monthly Catalog, OCLC), or consulting the publication. Date of publication could not be determined for 27 (2.52%) of the records from the public library, and 9 (1.03%) of the academic library records. Nearly all of these publications were determined to have been published between 1975 and 1981.[4] Records whose dates could not be determined are omitted from the summary statistics which follow unless noted.

FINDINGS

United States Government publications were the predominant type of publication which circulated in 1981 (Table 2). State and local publications comprised the next largest segments. The 'other' category includes privately published material, United Nations publications, and material from miscellaneous collections housed in the departments (e.g., Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development at the public library; Rand reports at

the academic).

Hardcopy publications comprised 99% of the material which circulated in both institutions. At the public library microfiche accounted for 12 circulations (1.119%), at the academic 11 (1.253%), including those publications whose exact date of publication could not be determined.

An examination of the public library circulation frequencies (Table 3) clearly reveals that current documents circulated more in 1981. The five years with the highest circulation frequencies were the five most current years (1977 through 1981).

The academic library frequencies (Table 4) also indicate that recent documents circulated more in 1981. The five years with the highest circulation frequencies were 1976 through 1980.

It is interesting to note that circulation of documents published in 1981 was relatively low in comparison to 1979 and 1980 publications. This is true for both institutions and may be attributed to several causes: 1) delays in depository distribution; 2) processing delays within the individual documents department; 3) delays in the appearance of the access tools for government publications (e.g., Monthly Catalog); 4) delays in the appearance of publications in access tools; 5) slight decrease

(5%) in the amount of depository material made available.

It is clear from the chart (Figure 1) that the circulation frequencies for both institutions dropped and leveled for material published before the early 60's. It is also clear that the highest frequencies occurred in the publications of the most recent decade. The higher circulation frequencies of the public library in pre-1960 publications are best explained by the fact that it has been a depository library much longer and as a result has a stronger retrospective collection.

In the two institutions documents published within the last decade (1972-1981) account for more than 75% of 1981 circulation (77.703% public; 84.810% academic). Documents published between 1963 and 1981 accounted for more than 90% of circulation (91.100%) at the public library. In the academic library materials published between 1969 and 1981 represented more than 90% of the circulated documents (90.104%). Publications dated 1978 through 1981 accounted for more than 50% of 1981 circulations at both institutions (53.301% public; 53.165% academic).

One obvious reason for the increase in circulation in more recent material would be an increase in the number of government publications in the same time period.[5] There is, however, no evidence to support a proportional increase in the number of

government publications received at the two institutions. The academic library print collection doubled in the 1972-1981 period (from approximately 200,000 to 400,000 pieces) and thus accounted for about 50% of the total collection. Material dated from that same time period accounted for 84.810% of total circulations. A portion of that increase can be attributed to addition of material published before 1972. It was not possible to measure how large that portion was. Collection growth for the same time period at the public library could not be determined. It is estimated that growth was less than that in the academic library in the decade.

Exact counts for growth in the 1978 to 1981 print collections, however, were available for both institutions. Publications from that period accounted for 53% of circulations at both institutions. The academic library hardcopy collection grew by about 89,000 pieces from 1978 to 1981 and accounted for 23% of the collection in 1982 (89,0000 of 390,000 total). As noted above, a certain portion of the publications added at the time would have been published at an earlier date. The public library hardcopy collection grew by approximately 108,000 pieces during the four year period 1978-1981 and accounted for 23% of the collection by 1982 (108,000 of 532,000 total).

SUMMARY AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

In the institutions studied, recent documents account for more circulations than do older ones. Plotting circulation frequency by year of publication reveals a clear pattern--circulation decreases rapidly as age increases. The trend is similar both in the public library and in the academic library, and cannot be explained wholly by proportional growth in the number of government publications over the same period. If this circulation data is accepted as valid evidence, it may then be well for these institutions to consider date of publication as one factor when weeding decisions must be made.

This study's findings are preliminary and should be balanced against its definite limitations. It deals only with documents circulation in a single year and only in two institutions. However, if circulation is accepted as one indicator of use and if the institutions are considered as typical of large depositories in urban areas, the findings should still be of interest and merit further investigation. Of interest for further research would be (in no particular order): 1) broadening the study to include non-circulation use; 2) comparing use in document collections of different sizes in various types of institutions; 3) constructing time series data; 4) comparing different segments of the

collection in terms of publication date and use (e.g., is the circulation pattern the same for Commerce Department and Interior Department publications?); 5) studying use of individual titles; 6) constructing ratios of use by shelf space (e.g., if everything were equal, are the 1000 feet of publications from agency X used ten times that of the 100 feet of publications from agency Y?).

NOTES

1. I use the term 'weeding' broadly to mean removal from the collection whether for discard, offsite storage, conversion to microform, or any other alternative.

2. Two literature surveys which include circulation studies are F.W. Lancaster, Measurement and Evaluation of Library Services, (Washington, D.C.: Information Resources Press, 1977), 178-206, and Maurice B. Line and A. Sandison, "'Obsolescence' and Changes in the Use of Literature with Time," Journal of Documentation, 30: 283-350 (1974).

3. Peter Hernon, "Documents Librarianship in the 1980s: Current Issues and Trends in Research," Government Publications Review, 9:99-120 (1982), discusses generally the lack of research in the area of documents. Examination of circulation records is suggested as one means of collecting data (p. 116).

4. The exact year of publication could not be determined, but a range of years in which publication took place could be. For example, bills had to fall into the 1979-1981 (95th and 96th Congresses) time period because of discard policies.

5. See Line and Sandison, "'Obsolescence' and Change," pp. 289-291.

TABLE 1

	PUBLIC LIBRARY	ACADEMIC LIBRARY
N =	2,094	8,024
n =	1,072	878
confidence	95%	95%
tolerance	3%	3.5%

N = Total 1981 circulation records

n = number of circulation records in sample

TABLE 2

	PUBLIC LIBRARY		ACADEMIC LIBRARY	
	number	percent	number	percent
Federal	976	91.045	770	87.698
State	61	5.690	52	5.923
Local	14	1.306	22	2.506
Other	21	1.959	34	3.873

CIRCULATION RECORDS IN SAMPLE BY TYPE OF PUBLICATION

TABLE 3

YEAR OF PUBLICATION	FREQUENCY	CUMULATIVE PERCENT
1981	90	8.612
1980	172	25.072
1979	212	45.359
1978	83	53.301
1977	74	60.383
1976	43	64.498
1975	36	67.943
1974	44	72.153
1973	29	74.928
1972	29	77.703
1971	30	80.574
1970	15	82.010
1969	15	83.445
1968	23	85.646
1967	16	87.177
1966	10	88.134
1965	8	88.900
1964	10	89.856
1963	13	91.100
1962	5	91.579
pre-1962	88	100.000

PUBLIC LIBRARY

CIRCULATION FREQUENCY FOR DOCUMENTS RETURNED IN 1981

TABLE 4

YEAR OF PUBLICATION	FREQUENCY	CUMULATIVE PERCENT
1981	49	5.639
1980	177	26.007
1979	144	42.578
1978	92	53.165
1977	93	63.867
1976	54	70.081
1975	46	75.374
1974	25	78.251
1973	28	81.473
1972	29	84.810
1971	20	87.112
1970	18	89.183
1969	8	90.104
1968	5	90.679
1967	12	92.060
1966	12	93.441
1965	5	94.016
1964	6	94.707
1963	5	95.282
1962	7	96.087
pre-1962	34	100.00

ACADEMIC LIBRARY

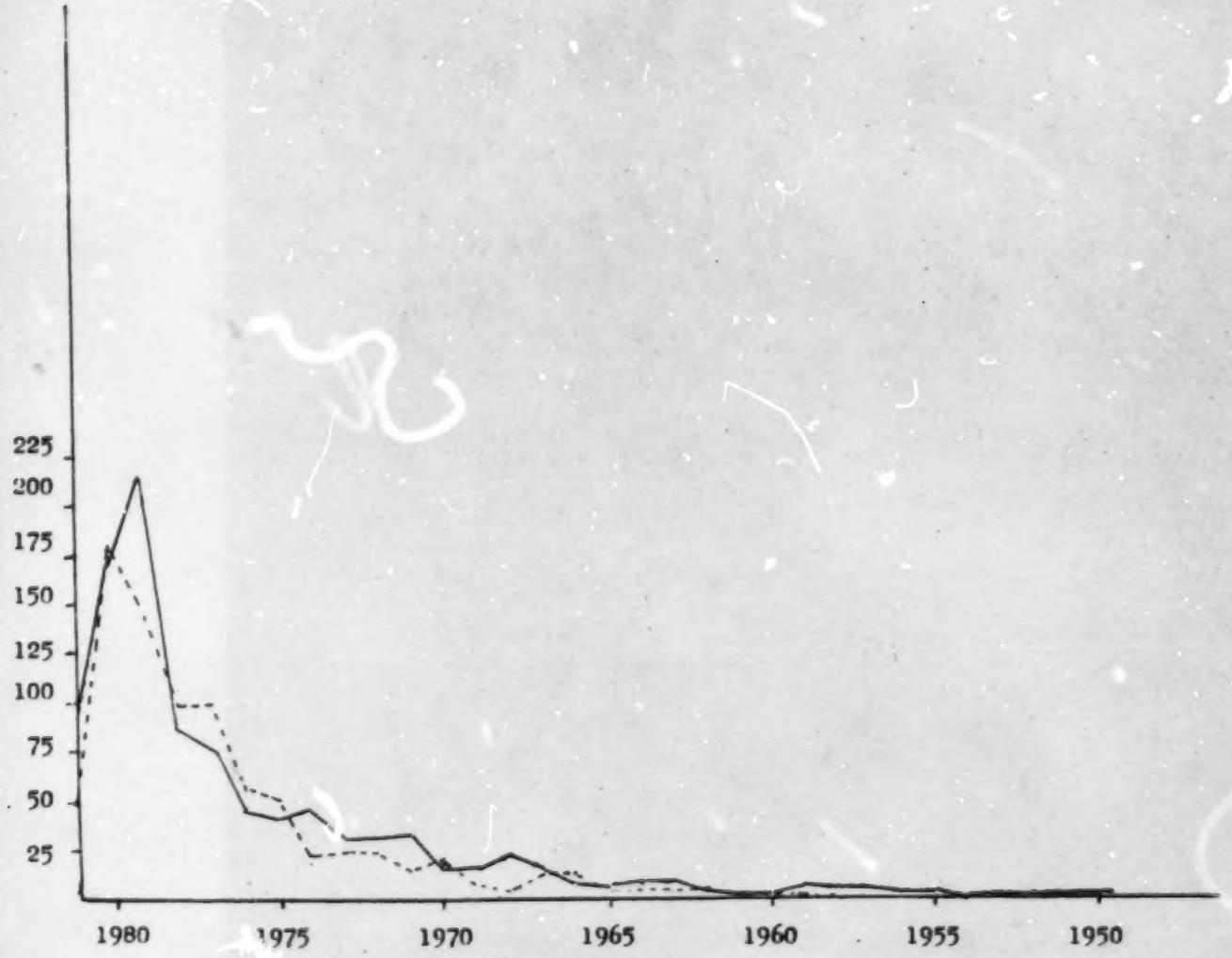
CIRCULATION FREQUENCY FOR DOCUMENTS RETURNED IN 1981

FIGURE 1

19[illegible] CIRCULATION FREQUENCY BY YEAR OF PUBLICATION

PUBLIC LIBRARY _____

ACADEMIC LIBRARY - - - - - - - - - -


225
200
175
150
125
100
75
50
25
1980
1975
1970
1965
1960
1955
1950